

# Standards of Accreditation review: early fall 2025

By BARBARA HORKOFF MUTCH

*The Board of Commissioners and working committee overseeing the 2024–26 biennium review of the Standards of Accreditation and Policies of the Commission on Accrediting are grateful for broad member engagement in the process. Seventy-five percent of the 230 Standards Review Webinar registrants participated in the June 20 webinar—remarkably high for a summer event.*

## **Strong affirmation of Standards' abilities**

The approach adopted for the process (peer review survey, initial public call for comments, Biennial Meeting structured review) and the significant member involvement (more than 500 individuals providing input) revealed strong membership affirmation for the ability of the Standards to do the following:

- Promote the improvement and enhancement of theological education;
- Respect member schools' various missions and theological commitments;
- Be sufficiently flexible for the creative pursuit of those missions;
- Help schools remain focused on context and student outcomes.

Six “big topics” emerged out of the changing educational and technological landscape. These include:

- Global awareness and engagement;
- Competency-based theological education (CBTE);
- Distinctives of schools embedded in or otherwise related to other institutions (such as universities);



- The use of Generative AI (GenAI);
- The PhD residency requirement;
- Digital learning.

The implications of these in relation to the *Standards of Accreditation* were examined closely by the working committee. Modest revisions were proposed to the language of the Standards in relation to a few of these topics, e.g., CBTE, GenAI.

## **Diversity as an additional “big topic”**

The rapidly changing regulatory environment in the United States led to a risk assessment commissioned by ATS in spring 2025 and resulted in the late addition of a seventh big topic—diversity.

The commitment to diversity as a core value of the ATS membership remains steadfast. As stated on the [ATS website](#), ATS is committed to diversity that is a visible sign of God's intention for humanity. The Association values the multiple forms of diversity that exist among the member schools and encourages each school to continuously define and demonstrate its own commitment to diversity within the context of its mission, history, constituency, educational practices, structures, and theological commitments.

At the same time, the recent focus on diversity in executive orders and regulatory guidance invites a consistent

defining of the ATS core value of diversity throughout the *Standards of Accreditation* and a careful refining of the language of diversity demographics where necessary.

### ***Responses closely mirror membership makeup***

A public call for comments in response to the initial proposed revisions was extended from late June through mid-September. As of September 11, 30 comments were submitted from individuals at member schools. Of the comments, 40 percent (12) were from individuals at schools that identify as Evangelical, 33 percent (10) as Mainline, and 27 percent (8) as Roman Catholic. This closely approximates the representation of these ecclesial families within the membership overall, with Evangelical schools slightly underrepresented and Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools slightly overrepresented. Thirteen percent of the comments were submitted by individuals from four Canadian schools, which is precisely the representation of Canadian schools within the overall ATS membership.

The proposed revisions were affirmed in many of the submissions in language such as:

- “All the changes are reasonable and helpful.”
- “The revisions are appropriate and provide clarity to schools as they attempt to live into their missions for theological education.”
- “The suggested revisions seem appropriate and helpful.”

The addition of language ensuring that a written Doctor of Ministry project is “appropriately rigorous

for a doctoral degree” (Standard 5.4) was appreciated. Helpful language of “related” institutions (to join the organizational expressions of freestanding and embedded) was offered. And the reworking of Standard 9.3 to provide greater capacity to evaluate the practices of governing bodies was welcomed. In addition, two different comments regarding the assessment of digital library resources will be considered carefully by the Board of Commissioners.

### ***Diversity commitment critical***

The single area that received the most comments was diversity. Comments citing support for the proposed revisions of language referring to diversity were received in equal number to comments sharing the concern that any changes continue to uphold a clear commitment to diversity.

Addition of the phrase “diversity appropriate to its mission, history, constituency, theological commitments, and context” (Standard 1.5) was strongly affirmed. Attention was called to the proposed deletion of the descriptors “number and diversity” as criteria for sufficiency in employees (Standard 10.1).

The Board of Commissioners and the working group will attend thoroughly to all advice and affirmations, revisit the initial proposed revisions in light of the public comments, and offer a second set of revisions to the membership at a webinar later this fall in preparation for a vote by the membership at the 2026 Biennial Meeting. It is rewarding to work on new educational opportunities to support schools in their missions of theological education and gratifying to hear directly how the *Standards of Accreditation* largely meet the current needs of schools.



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